INTERNALIST EVIDENTIALISM AND EPISTEMIC VIRTUE: RE-REPLY TO AXTELL

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ABSTRACT: In this brief re-reply to Axtell, I reply to key criticisms of my previous reply and flesh out a bit my notions of the relationship between internalist evidentialism and epistemic virtue and epistemic value.

KEYWORDS: virtue epistemology, evidentialism, reductionism, epistemic value, Meno problem

1. Why I don't think epistemic responsibility deserves its own category: on not multiplying categories without necessity

Axtell asserts that the standard cases of practical irrationality and moral responsibility that I mention seem "very dissimilar in basic respects" to my example of a case of epistemic irresponsibility (which Axtell readily accepts as such). I think that is too strongly stated. Furthermore, I suspect there is a 'philosopher's mistake' in the neighborhood. We philosophers tend to think there is something extra special about the 'quest for truth' when, in fact, it is just one quest among many, and for most of the world it is subordinate to the 'quest for survival' (in the Two Thirds World) or the 'quest for the next hot thing' (in the West). And it could be that there are other apparent dissimilarities due to the fact that I was naturally attempting to illustrate categories with unambiguous paradigmatic instances. Cases more near the borders will seem more similar. Furthermore, I don't know that given a broad array of cases of moral irresponsibility we should expect them all to clearly look alike. In point of fact, the examples I gave are quite diverse and yet Axtell doesn't question them as cases of the same kind. Thus, I don't think Axtell has presented any kind of disconfirmation by the (alleged) disimilarity.

This last point is worth elaborating, for it illustrates a point I've been trying to make all along. The point concerns an appropriate respect for parsimony. Here are three examples from the previous paper, all of which can be instances of moral irresponsibility: forgetting to mail an important check, drinking too much, spending too much on a watch. I said I was trying to give paradigm examples of non-epistemic failings. And Axtell raises no suspicions about my list. Yet what if someone claimed *this* list contained items too diverse to fall under one banner because they were "very dissimilar in basic respects"? The first involves memory,

the second physical health, the third fiscal matters. So perhaps the first involves a new, sui generis form of normativity *memorial irresponsibility*. Perhaps the second involves a new, sui generis form of normativity *bodily irresponsibility*. Perhaps the third involves a new, sui generis form of normativity *fiscal irresponsibility*. That would clearly be absurd. These are all cases of moral irresponsibility in different domains of life. That is *precisely* what I am saying about so-called cases of epistemic irresponsibility. There is no new, sui generis form of normativity *epistemic irresponsibility* but rather a form of moral or practical failure with epistemic consequences. So the very feature that Axtell points to as a problem seems to be a good illustration of what's just right about my view.

2. One way to tell when normative categories are distinct: Plato, Firth, and Chisholm

I do not intend to engage in a debate about the history of epistemology. However, it does appear to me that from at least the *Meno* and *Theatetus* – which Chisholm interacts with[1] – the epistemic is that which provides the 'specific difference' (the species-defining characteristic) between mere true belief and knowledge. Chisholm seems to think (and I agree) that his theory of epistemic justification is a development of the notion of an 'account' introduced by Plato.

My position is that the Theatetic notion of (the core of) knowledge (with a nod to Gettier) as justified true belief places *epistemic justification* as the central concern of epistemology. Even if the aim is stated to be knowledge, truth is a free-rider. There is no epistemic merit in gaining the truth in an irrational manner, so the epistemic value of knowledge is supplied by rational element: justification.

Chisholm, in fact, seems to want to reduce normative categories as well, reducing the epistemic to the moral. That is, like me, he thinks the 'ethics of belief' really is just ethics (as does Zagzebski, as I point out in my "Reducing Responsibility: An Evidentialist Account of Epistemic Blame."[2]). It's just that, ironically, I think what he was calling ethics is in fact the core of epistemology, as I think Firth shows.[3] (Sometimes it seems that Locke has this in mind as well, for he speaks of a duty to God to use our faculties wisely.[4])

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[1] Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966), 5.

[2] *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2011, doi:10.1111/j.1468-0378.2010.00422.x.

[3] See Roderick Firth, "Ultimate Evidence," *The Journal of Philosophy* 53, 23 (1956), American Philosophical Association Eastern Division: Symposium Papers to be Presented at the Fifty-Third Annual Meeting, University of Pennsylvania, December 27-29, 1956 (Nov. 8, 1956): 732-739, "Chisholm and the Ethics of Belief," *The Philosophical Review* 68, 4 (1959): 493-506, and "Are Epistemic Concepts Reducible to Ethical Concepts," in *Values and Morals*, eds. A.

Firth-type cases show that the two notions can come apart. Here is a case I hope is sufficiently clear where one has all-things-considered moral reason to believe p yet all-things-considered epistemic reasons not to believe p. S has randomly sampled 15.58 trillion F's (that's one F for every dollar of US debt as of a few seconds ago). 99.99% of them have been G's. Every expert statistician on the planet agrees the sampling method was legitimate and has no worries about any features of the sample or the population which might prevent a standard inference. Let p be *Most F's are G's*. S has no other evidence pertaining to the proportion of G's among F's besides the sample distribution result. Clearly, S has an all-things-considered epistemic reason to believe p. But wait...S' has offered S $15.58 trillion (almost enough to pay off all US debt) to believe not-p. Let F and G represent properties which are of absolutely no practical importance. Perhaps at issue is the proportion of teenage boys scores on video games which have a '2' in them somewhere. There are no counter-offers or competing concerns. Clearly, S has an all-things-considered practical reason to (attempt to) bring it about that she comes to believe not-p. The reason we believe in these two distinct kinds of normativity is because we have two distinct kinds of reasons. This latter fact we know by contemplating clear cases like the exaggerated Firth case I have just provided (actually, I think we can know this by common sense, but the example confirms it). What no responsibilist has done to my knowledge is provide a case in which 'epistemic responsibility' is clearly distinct from other notions of normativity.

3. Why internalist evidentialism has no destructive practical consequences: disagreement and 'epistemic virtue'

Axtell raises two charges of negative consequences of internalist evidentialism. (N.B. 1: One can be an evidentialist without being an internalist, and there several versions of internalism. N.B. 2: That a thesis has adverse consequences is no evidence that it is false.) The first charge is original; the second charge is not (and is not intended to be). The first charge is that evidentialism cannot support reasonable disagreement (which he identifies with Rawlsian pluralism, which I

Goldman and J Kim (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978), 215-229, and cf. Susan Haack, "The ethics of belief reconsidered," in *The philosophy of Roderick M. Chisholm*, ed. L. Hahn (LaSalle: Open Court, 1997), 129–144.

[4] "He that believes without having any reason for believing, may be in love with his own fancies; but neither seeks truth as he ought, nor pays the obedience due his Maker, who would have him use those discerning faculties he has given him." (John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, Chap 15, Section 5).

doubt is correct). This charge is false, as I demonstrate in my forthcoming "Dealing with Disagreement from the First Person Perspective: A Probabilist Proposal."[5] In short, internalist evidentialism only calls for suspension of judgement in an idealized case: two people with credences symmetric about .5 with exactly the same evidence and exactly the same reliability. If any of these variables change, then my internalist evidentialst theory of epistemic peer disagreement entails that we shift our views with the consensus. And this seems like precisely the reasonable thing to do. So, far from having negative consequences in the realm of disagreement, a properly scientifically-minded, probabilistic internalist evidentialism can have quite salutary consequences in cases of disagreement.

The second negative consequence of internalist evidentialism Axtell mentions is best summarized by Alvin Goldman. "The main problem facing deontological evidentialism is to account for the virtues of evidence gathering."[6] This is simply false. Most people care about the truth. That is, they desire to have true beliefs (how exactly to state the relevant desire is actually a bit tricky). And, given this desire, dispositions toward effective evidence gathering will have (in cooperative circumstances) a tendency to produce true beliefs. That's a good-making feature for anyone who cares about truth. On the objective interpretation, it is a good for humans to have the truth. Therefore, there exists a practical reason to instantiate habits that promote the formation of true beliefs. On either of these accounts we ought (whether it is the subjective ought, the objective ought, or both) form those habits. This is all perfectly compatible with internalist evidentialism.

Again, the so-called epistemic virtues are just moral virtues with epistemic payoffs. The value of those virtues is wholly explained by this natural picture. There is nothing to be gained by calling these virtues 'epistemic.' It can only be misleading. For the forms of normativity involved are clear cases of practical rationality or teleology. It could be that not all dispositions which are beneficial for evidence gathering fit neatly into the category of moral virtue. I'm not committed to any thesis about natural kinds of virtues. There are lots of dispositions with lots of different kinds of effects, both good and bad. Furthermore, the kinds of traits which responsibilists name 'epistemic virtues,' e.g. conscientiousness, bear no necessary connection to success in evidence gathering. They may well have some intrinsic goodness derived from the goodness of the intentions which

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[5] In *Disagreement and Skepticism*, ed. Diego Machuca, Routledge.
[6] Alvin I. Goldman, *Pathways to Knowledge: Private and Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 56, as quoted by Axtell.

motivate such actions,[7] but it is wholly contingent which practices are *successful*. Methods helpful in one environment or world will be of ill effect in another.

But even if the charge were true, it would be irrelevant to the truth of evidentialism. Consider the parallel case to consequentialism. One sometimes hears the objection that the consequences of acts are too complicated to calculate, and so consequentialism offers no guidance in how to act. But consequentialism isn't *intended* to provide guidance in how to act. It is a *theory of right action*. It would be nice if that helped, and it would be unsurprising if it did, but it is no mark against the truth of a theory that it isn't *useful*, when it is only meant to be *accurate*.

4. That 'fallacies' are not always cognitive defects

Axtell alleges an "obvious inconsistency" in claiming that an agent is not subject to distinctively epistemic sanction when committing fallacies of reasoning or exhibiting cognitive biases. The problem with this suggestion is that, like most informal fallacies and cognitive biases, the ones he mentions are sometimes good modes of thinking and sometimes bad ones. (Obviously it is never good to *improperly* appeal to authority, but the adjective implicates that it sometimes is proper to appeal to authority, and it will sometimes be disputatious which is which.) In fact, that holds true for deductive 'fallacies' as well: scientific confirmation via successful prediction is a form of affirming the consequent.

But let's look at the two examples he gives.

A. "I can't read or consider that recommended book on evolution

because it will lead to ungodliness."

B. "Others tell me not to read such rubbish, so rubbish it must be."

With respect to A, the belief expressed is either evidentially justified or it is not. If it is not, then that is part of what is wrong with it. And whether it is justified or not, the speaker either cares more about godliness than furthering their knowledge of the creation/evolution debate or they do not. If they do care more about godliness and they think there is a conflict between having that property and reading the books, then it seems perfectly appropriate not to read the books. It's a typical philosopher's mistake to think that one should always do more research. If the individual does not care more about godliness and, instead, cares more about the truth of the matter, then it is utterly imprudent not to read the books. 'Fallacy' doesn't even seem to be a helpful term here. The notion of a

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[7] See Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) on this.

formal fallacy is comparably clear: to make an inference that is not truth-preserving. But the notion of an informal fallacy is, I assert, very fuzzy and unhelpful at the relevant level of generalization. It is sometimes said that to count as a fallacy at all – formal or informal – an item must be a part of an argument for the truth of some conclusion. It is not clear that A even qualifies as an inference in the relevant sense. It seems to be a clear case of deliberation. As such, it should be judged on a prudential basis.

As for B, whether this inference is good or bad depends on whether one's evidence supports the proposition that the 'others' involved are generally reliable. Of course, the *degree* to which it makes sense to check on the reliability of others depends on just one thing: how much is at stake. If there is not much at stake, then it makes perfect sense to just go with what people are saying, like if you step off of a train and want to know where to catch a cab and are in no hurry.

I see no relevant difference in this case between formal and informal fallacies. Suppose someone is attempting to prove that some wff the main operator of which is a negation is a theorem. They do their truth-tree and there are open branches and so conclude that it is not a theorem. The problem, suppose, is that the fact that a negation was the main operator of the wff caused them not to negate the wff before beginning the truth tree. This is a mistake in reasoning. Is this oversight *irresponsible*? Well, that depends on what is at stake. If the individual is a logic TA maybe they had a responsibility to be extra careful and maybe even work from a flowchart. But if not, if she's just passing the time waiting for the train, then there's no kind of blame *at all* that needs to be applied. It's a typical 'philosopher's mistake' to think that every act of bad reasoning is reprehensible.

5. On competence in achieving one's intellectual ends

Axtell insists upon more entanglement between the epistemic and the moral/practical than I have. But he never quite says how he envisions this entanglement. I have, in fact, presented a theory of the appropriate kind of entanglement. Epistemology defines a certain kind of value – epistemic value – which consists in realizing one's *telos* as a rational animal, a *reasons weighing* animal: having a degree of certainty which matches the weight of one's reasons (the sum total of which is one's evidence). When one has attempted to achieve this epistemic end and formed one's degree of belief, then one can consider what one desires and to what degree. What one ought to do in a case will be determined by instances of practical reasoning. Practical reasoning involves considering both one's desires and ones degrees of belief in the way regimented by decision theory.

It is in practical reasoning's use of degrees of belief that the epistemic and the moral/practical are properly entangled.

By "intellectual competence" Axtell seems to have in mind a certain set of skills or habits which include skill at identifying evidence. There is a bit of a generality problem here as Axtell doesn't flesh out what an exercise of this skill would look like. As far as I can tell, there is no set of practices at an appropriate level of generality that bear any necessary connection to identifying one's evidence, nor do I see such a connection between identifying one's evidence and forming true beliefs. If we take a 'thick' view of the so-called intellectual virtues – such as taken by Roberts and Wood[8] and Baehr[9] – then it is simply an empirical matter whether and when they are going to be beneficial. To take an example, sometimes being conscientious in research will lead to more evidentially justified beliefs and sometimes it will lead to less: maybe you stay up so late studying that you miss an important class or are over-tired and can't focus the next day. Identifying the best strategies for achieving our intellectual ends is best left to cognitive psychologists.

More broadly, Axtell appears to identify the epistemic with the truth-directed, but this is contentious. The western tradition of epistemology essentially starts on Plato's *Meno* and *Theatetus* in which Plato puzzles over what distinguishes – in nature and importance – knowledge from mere true belief. There is no epistemic merit merely in believing the truth. Epistemology is normative; it investigates how one *ought* to believe. But belief is not a normative notion nor is truth. The idea that truth or belief are normative rests on the metaphor that "belief aims at truth." There is a large literature on this, and I cannot get into it here, but my position is that it is dubious at best whether this metaphor latches onto anything true and of consequence to the present discussion. Here I can only say two things about my position.

First, I think it is *agents* who aim at belief (and goodness), not intentional states, whether beliefs or desires. Second, this does not indicate a lack of belief in natural teleology. I do think that beliefs and desires have functional roles and nondefectvieness conditions in an agent's mental economy to bring about rational actions. Do I think that a false belief is defective as such? No, I do not. Beliefs are either basic or inferred. An inferred belief that fits the non-basic evidence is everything it is meant by nature or Nature's God to be. It is insulated from any

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[8] Robert Roberts Jay W. Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[9] Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

further evaluation by the fact that the evidence stands between it and the world. I think it is perceptual states which are more likely to have some kind of accuracy condition, but there is nothing there for responsibilists to work with as far as I can tell. So goes it with basic beliefs. Their 'job' is to fit the empirical evidence. There is nothing more we can ask of them.[10]

Haack sums up the value of truth for humans aptly and is worth quoting at length.

> Intellectual integrity is instrumentally valuable, because, in the long run and on the whole, it advances inquiry; and successful inquiry is instrumentally valuable. Compared with other animals, we are not especially fleet or strong; our forte is a capacity to figure things out, hence to anticipate and avoid danger. Granted, this is by no means an unmixed blessing; the capacity that, as Hobbes puts it, enables men, unlike brutes, to engage in ratiocination, also enables men, unlike brutes, "to multiply one untruth by another." But who could doubt that our capacity to reason is of instrumental value to us humans?

> And intellectual integrity is morally valuable. This is suggested already by the way our vocabulary for the epistemic appraisal of character overlaps with our vocabulary for the moral appraisal of character: e.g., 'responsible,' 'negligent,' 'reckless,' 'courageous,' and, of course, 'honest.' And "He is a good man but intellectually dishonest" has, to my ear, the authentic ring of oxymoron.[11]

We philosophers tend to think that there is something important about believing the truth. If this is not just a prejudice (in which case there's just no question that moral and pragmatic norms are the only that can apply) but is rather an important human project, then there is a type of flourishing characteristic to such contact with reality. There seems something humanly defective with not caring whether one's beliefs are true or not. Plausibly, one is a *bad person* to the extent that they don't have a truth-oriented concern. But, whereas there is something *incoherent* about having degrees of certainty that do not match one's degree of evidential support, there doesn't seem to be an such analog in the case of having a justified belief which isn't true. This is a sign that we are dealing with two different kinds of normativity here.

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[10] For very different views, see Jonathan Kvanvig, "Truth is not the primary epistemic goal," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, eds. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 285-296 and Marian David, "Truth as the primary epistemic goal: a working hypothesis," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, 296-312. Though both views are at odds with mine, I think there are parts of each that support the kind of picture I'm painting here.

[11] Susan Haack, "Concern for Truth: What it Means, Why it Matters," in *The Flight from Science and Reason*, eds. Paul R. Gross, Norman Levitt, and Martin W. Lewis (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1996), 57-63.

It is well to keep in mind the three kinds of factors Jonathan Kvanvig urges us to attend to:

> we need to notice is that there are three dimensions here as well: the descriptive realm of how people go about making sense of things, the normative realm about how they should or should not do so, and the evaluative realm of how it is best done ... the perspectivality platitude that what is appropriate to think or do is a matter of one's total perspective on the world and one's place in it. The rest is a matter of things going well or badly, and ... the world is never as cooperative as we would like in lining up the good and the right.[12]

6. On diachronic considerations in belief

Assuming that we *do* or *morally should* have a desire for truth, the theory of inquiry is an important area of study. It can appeal to epistemology for a characterization of notions that will be important like evidence and justification. It will involve ethics in giving an account of how this duty is fulfilled. (My own view is, roughly, that one has responsibly inquired when further inquiry has no positive expected utility.) It will involve psycyhologists doing empirical research on just what modes of behavior in which conditions lead ones to better gather and assess evidence. The theory of inquiry is, then, an *interdisciplinary* field of study that, by definition, involves *multiple disciplines* (and sub-disciplines). A good model of this is so-called 'cognitive science,' which involves the cooperation of philosophy of mind, neurology, and psychology. As I have said before, there is more at stake than mere correct taxonomy. Aristotle pointed out long ago the importance of regulating our expectations and methods to the discipline. We stand only to gain confusion by misunderstanding what kind of theorizing we should be engaging in to understand the phenomenon in question. The theory of inquiry is too important to risk that confusion.

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[12] Jonathan Kvanvig, "Epistemic Normativity," in *Epistemic Normativity*, eds. John Turri and Clayton Littlejohn (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).